

Michigan: Oakland University professors walk out

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Six hundred professors and faculty members at Oakland University (OU), near Pontiac, Michigan, walked off the job Thursday to oppose a wage freeze and a severe rollback in health care benefits. They are also fighting OU administration efforts to create a new class of teachers, which would constitute 20 percent of the faculty, with no tenure and job security. Instructors are also opposing measures by the administration aimed at undermining their participation in decision-making on class sizes and other teaching conditions.

The university, a few miles from the headquarters of the formerly bankrupt automaker Chrysler, has been hard hit by the decline in the auto industry and cuts in state funding by Michigan's Democratic governor, Jennifer Granholm.

State funding as a percentage of the university's general fund budget has dropped to an all-time low of 25 percent. State dollars earmarked for OU for the next fiscal year are down \$2.3 million from a decade ago, and state funding per student is the second lowest among Michigan's 15 public universities.

The university's 18,000 students, many of whom commute and work one or two jobs to pay for school, have repeatedly been hit by tuition increases. In July the university's governing board approved a 9 percent tuition increase for this fall, the highest percentage increase among state universities. Annual tuition for a state resident freshman will rise to about \$8,783—excluding room and board, meals, textbooks and other amenities—up \$728 from last year.

On Wednesday evening professors voted overwhelmingly to strike and picket lines were set up at the campus on Thursday morning, the first day of scheduled classes. The administration was forced to

cancel classes indefinitely.

The faculty union—the American Association of University Professors—has called the walkout a “job action,” rather than a strike, in an effort to prevent retribution, including fines and other punitive actions under Michigan's reactionary law that prohibits strikes by public employees.

While the administration is demanding a wage freeze and other concessions, top executives at the school have been given significant increases, including OU President Dr. Gary Russi, who received a 40 percent raise bringing his salary to \$350,000.

On Thursday a large number of students joined professors at a campus rally, carrying signs in support of the teachers, including, “Higher Education, Not Profits.”

The president of the AAUP local, said that in addition to the wage and benefit concessions the administration was seeking to layoff 11 faculty members. The administration, he said, had made a profit year after year even as the economy worsened, and had a surplus of \$14 million this year. But administrators said they would not touch the reserve fund because the credit rating agency Moody's would downgrade the university's bonds if it did.

Negotiations, which began in May, were ongoing, he said, with both sides meeting with a mediator at the Michigan Employment Relations Commission offices in downtown Detroit. Negotiators could not meet at the MERC offices tomorrow, however, because Friday was a furlough day imposed on state employees, due to Michigan's budget crisis.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with striking

professors at the rally. Ron Cramer, a Reading and Language Arts professor with 43 years experience, told the WSWs, “The basic issues aren’t strictly economic. We’d like a raise, but our biggest concern is that they want to take the faculty out of governance decisions and the administration wants to hire untenured and untenurable faculty, which they can fire and hire at will with no recourse.

“They also want to add a health care rider, which would allow some third party to decide if someone in your family was not healthy. If they did, they would force you to pay for that person’s medical care.

“We’ve been on strike before, usually about raises and other economic issues. This year it is different. It’s almost like they wanted to force us out on strike to see what they could do to us. This is the most difficult situation I’ve seen in 40 years.

“This is a state university and we’ve been hit by reductions in state aid. Right now we receive about 25 percent of our revenue in state aid, 50 percent from tuition and another 25 percent in all sorts of grants and gifts.”

Cramer commented on the recent forced bankruptcies of General Motors and Chrysler and the concessions imposed by the Obama administration on auto workers. “The auto workers really took it in the butt,” he said. “What they achieved in collective bargaining has always affected us. Their decline is hitting everyone. It’s getting worse and worse across the country—when are things going to get better.”



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